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Elizabeth Rhodes

Dance, Stephen F. Austin State University, erhodes@sfasu.edu

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WHERE AFRICA MEETS EUROPE: AFRO-COLONIAL INFLUENCES AS SEEN IN THE TRADITION OF THE MIRRORED DEVILS OF PANAMA

Elizabeth Rhodes

The Republic of Panama is rich with folklore traditions which include as many different kinds of devils as there are provinces. *Diablos sucios* (dirty devils) and *grandiablos* (grand devils) can be seen in festivals across the country. Less visible are the *diablos de espejo*, or devils of the mirrors, which dance each year in the village of Escobal for the celebration of Corpus Christi. The dance movement performed throughout the day and the culminating drama which occurs in the local Catholic church at the end of day demonstrate a clear melding of African and Spanish colonial influences.

Satin skirts studded with silver dollar-sized mirrors catch the reflection of the evening sky as the devils line up outside of the humble, yet picturesque, village church. The accordion player and *tamboreros* (drummers) who have accompanied the dancing devils throughout the day continue their simple melody as the rhythm is picked up and reiterated by a bell-ringer stationed in the church's tower. The musicians remain outside the double doors of the Catholic church while those who have participated in this day-long celebration of Corpus Christi prepare to enter. One by one each participant executes a backward traveling step—left, right, left, pause; right, left, right, pause—as he approaches the altar. Arms move in opposition to legs; shoulders oppose hips. Masks depicting a variety of animals obscure facial features but at the same time accentuate the movement of the head giving the appearance that the fantastic creature is peering in all directions. As the devil approaches the altar, he turns to face the priest who displays a small cross, held as vertically as his spine. In this display of malevolent versus good, the devil momentarily loses his powers and runs from the church. His cry which resembles the bleating of a sheep crescendos as he communicates the urgency of a quick escape.

The devil makes a second attempt to move up the aisle, again pressing his back through the space, twisting at the waistline, and incorporating a hop with the upbeat of each even measure. This time he seems to know what he is about to face and exhibits yet a stronger reaction to the symbols of the Catholic faith as he rejects priest, altar, cross, and candles while fleeing the scene. With the third entrance, a change has taken place. The devil has removed his mask before passing through the double doors. His eyes are downcast; his steps slightly tentative. He has shed enough evil to enable him to face the priest, but cannot look him in the eye. He drops to his knees and shuffles the remaining distance to the front of the church. Still kneeling, he holds his arms aloft, elbows dropped, palms raised. The priest raises his arms with perfect parallel lines reiterating the “V” shapes. He makes the sign of the cross and offers a communion wafer to the repenting recipient. A sprinkling of holy water completes the interaction, and the now-converted devil moves toward the right of the altar to light a candle before taking a seat on one of the wooden pews.

In the small town of Escobal, I had just witnessed the culminating event of a series of activities surrounding the commemoration of Corpus Christi, an important holiday or *holy day* on the Catholic calendar. Located in the province of Colon, Republic of Panama, Escobal is normally a quiet community, geographically separated from Panama City by the Panama Canal and Lake Gatun. It is closer to Colon, once a thriving city known as *la tacita de oro* (little cup of gold), which serves as the Canal's port on the Caribbean side; however, to access Escobal even from the proximity of Colon, one must cross over the locks of Lake Gatun which give priority to ships in transit. If the signal controlling ground traffic has just turned red, travelers may face up to a half hour delay. Then, one risks trailing a slow vehicle laden with dirt or fruit or commuters on a two-lane, shoulderless road. The entire Isthmus of Panama is only about 50 kilometers in width, but relatively short distances can leave communities in isolation.

Perhaps due to such isolation, Escobal's tradition of the *diablos de espejo*, or devils of the mirrors, is under-represented among typical displays of folkloric dances as seen in carnival parades and the long-standing Corpus Christi celebration in the Villa of Los Santos, the latter of which has grown to include national popular stars in a live telecast from the main square. In contrast, Escobal's commemorative events occur largely as a result of the efforts of one folklore group which travels from Panama City in an attempt to keep the tradition alive. Directed by Marcia Rodriguez of the National Institute of Art and Culture

(*Instituto Nacional de Arte y Cultura* or *INAC*), the company is joined by residents of the village and visitors from Cativá, a town approximately five kilometers from Colon just off the road to Panama City.

The ritual of the *diablos de espejo* begins at sunrise when those who will participate bathe in the Chagres River. At least this is the case on June 3, 1999, a day which begins with overcast skies that eventually accommodate a hot, blazing sun. "Is this a purification ceremony?" I ask myself. Do the *diablos* look at this early morning ablution as a symbol of rebirth or, at least, renewal of their vows in preparation for the long day of physical exertion before them? A conversation with Marcia's mother, Alejandra, reveals that the practice is indeed connected to the making and keeping of vows. She explains to me that as a child, she became so ill that her life was threatened. Her father dropped to his knees and declared that if his daughter were cured, he would dance from sunrise to sunset on the day of Corpus Christi for the remaining years of his life. Alejandra looks to be in her sixties, indicating that the tradition of the *diablos de espejo* in Escobal goes back at least 50 years and perhaps longer (1). Now it is her daughter who works to educate young people from Panama City in the importance of preserving the country's folk traditions, particularly those that have been practiced by Panamanians of African descent. She receives some support from *INAC* in the form of a van which has transported the dancers from Panama City the night before. She is also able to afford two accordion players, one of whom I had seen as a hired musician for other events; however, there is no money for food and the dancers must rely on the local community to provide housing as well as modest sustenance. Seemingly, the specific motivations which drive the participants to dedicate themselves to the ritual vary, but all are focused and tenacious in their desire to complete the series of activities which will follow.

After the baptismal dip, the performers dress, starting with nylon and lycra tights—even though the tropical climate will punish them for this aspect of costuming, to say nothing of the long-sleeved dress shirts worn. Pantaloon and skirts are constructed from a satin-like fabric and may contrast in color. For example, one dancer sports a gold skirt with clover-green pantaloons gathered at mid-thigh. The skirts are covered with small mirrors and formed into bell shapes with the aid of hoops made from wires or, in former times, vines. I recall the costumes for the *Montezuma Española*, a pageant for which the Villa of Los Santos is noted, depicting the conquest of Mexico. While the Spanish conquistadors wear military uniforms, the men representing the indigenous are costumed in satin dresses. Montezuma himself displays a large decorative heart similar to the ones that the *diablos de espejo* wear over their left breast. This representation of love, courage, and goodness is juxtaposed against the image of the devil created through the use of masks and hairpieces.

According to Lila and Richard Cheville, "the headgear is the most elaborate of any (Panamanian) devil group (93)." A hat is constructed from a circular base of wire (or, again, in past decades vines were used). A vertical framework which contains mirrors is perched in front and includes a long wire approximately two feet long which extends up and back. The tip of the central wire is anchored to the back of the circular wire base with a string which is long enough to allow the central wire to bend at an oblique angle but short enough to balance the weight of the extension. The entire headpiece is then covered with ribbons, acrylic yarn pompons, and more mirrors. To complete the costume, tresses fashioned from rope are anchored to the back of the head and fall between the scapulae. A bandana holds the hairpiece in place and provides a thin cushion for the headgear, while the mask is secured last.

Other accoutrements which adorn the outfit include a sash or shawl over the left shoulder and fastened under the left arm, canvas sports shoes, and ribbons criss-crossing the lower leg. Attempts are made to hold the leg ribbons in place with safety pins which inevitably result in small tears and runs in the stockings by the end of the afternoon. The overall effect combines animism which may have originally been influenced by African or Amerindian belief systems (Smith, 48) with the military attire of the Spanish colonial soldiers, and a skirt which mocks European dress while, at the same time, resembles the Santeño (3) interpretation of the regal attire worn by the Indian Chief Montezuma.

Once the dancers are properly attired, they begin their procession through the town. They slowly break into song and dance as they travel up the road to their first stop, an elementary school (4). The teacher welcomes them into a small classroom—at least the room *seems* small after nearly a dozen devils enter and an even greater number of schoolchildren crowd around the circle formed by the dancers. Some children

stand on their desks while others push their way into the circle and eventually take part. The devil assumes a posture shaped by a forward torso and head. Many carry batons and lean into them, accentuating the character poses, while convincing themselves that this increases their limited peripheral vision through the hand-crafted masks. A devil might dance alone surrounded by the group, or he may face a partner which results in the juxtapositioning of rhythms, levels, and shapes. Such relationships can become competitive as well. The integral movement pattern--stepping from right foot to left, right and a hop--continues. The legs and feet are turned out and the hips swivel followed by a wafting of the hoop skirt. The body weight is directed toward the ground with a low center of gravity; however, as the dance progresses, quick turns and light jumps embellish the movement. The baton is used for support and also as a percussion instrument striking the ground.

The next stop is a bar. Too small to accommodate all the dancers, the performance takes place in an open-air space framed by the building and a bus parked nearby. A laundromat provides the following location and allows for an escape from the sun rays which are already penetrating the coolness of the morning with their soon-to-be relentless heat. Up until this point, gifts have not been bestowed on the performers; however, as they continue up hill and past the church into a more residential area of Escobal, the custom of making offerings to the dancers is employed. Older residents who are visited recall and delight in the tradition. In fact, the group visits the family home of José María Chena Jr. where, I am told, the oldest woman in Escobal lives. She presents a handful of chicken eggs nestled in a handkerchief to Alejandra. Perhaps this gift of food is more practical for her than an offering of money or perhaps she is honoring the tradition as it was celebrated decades ago. Families would simply give what they could in exchange for the troupe to perform in their homes.

By now the sun has climbed high in the sky and the dancers stop to rest in the shade of the ubiquitous palm trees. A nearby neighbor has made fruit flavored popsicles in small paper cups and sells them for five cents or *un real*, a monetary unit harking back to Spanish colonial times. They are a welcome treat, and I can only imagine the discomfort of the dancers who are sweating profusely in their long sleeves, stockings, masks, and headgear. Throughout the day, they limit their intake of replenishment to a light lunch and water which is sensible; however, I notice that many devils attempt to leave their masks on as much as possible impeding rehydration and intake of oxygen. As the dancing becomes aerobic with accompanying growls and tensed bodies, some dancers become lightheaded and one risks fainting (5).

After lunch, the dancers rest for a short while and proceed to an open cement patio. (Hopefully, they have taken advantage of their respite, as I observe no infrastructure to provide water or bathroom facilities for the rest of the day.) Since the dancers have more space, they are able to incorporate a greater variety of group activities and formations whereby several devils form a lattice with their batons, holding them parallel to the ground. The smallest devil, often a child or slender female, will then mount the structure and be elevated above the shoulders of the supporting devils, reminiscent of Catholic processions with a saint held aloft (6).

The 4/4 beat of the music continues. The melody is simple and nearly identical to the tune used for the dance of the *grandiablos* of Chorrera (7). It is played over and over by the accordionists who take turns accompanying the dancers. Sporadically, the devils sing a playful rhyme about the dancing capacity of the "wife of the priest," a paradox since a priest would not be married. My host, Isabel Santa María, who grew up in Escobal, informs me that when she was a girl, the harmonica was used to accompany the ritual. In spite of the change in the melodic instruments used, a common thread is provided by the *tambor*, the shape of which resembles a small conga drum. It is closed on both ends and played with a stick. The basic rhythm follows a two-measure pattern: three quarter notes with an accent on the third note and a quarter rest; one quarter note, two eighth notes, another quarter note, and a quarter rest.

Unlike the accordionists who have come from Panama City, the drummers are from the community, and they become nearly as entranced as the dancers. It is a symbiotic relationship with each group feeding off the energy of the other. Their circular formation is reminiscent of African communal dances where unity, family, and inclusion are important elements, and for those participants who have brought their children, there is an apparent apprenticeship that occurs in the transference of information regarding costuming, dancing, and singing.

As sundown approaches, the devils make their way to the village church where the local priest is prepared to participate in the folk tradition. First the devil dancers line up outside with their backs to the foyer. The cadence of the tune that has been played on drums and accordion throughout the day is now reiterated by the rhythmic clanging of the bell in the church tower and signals the beginning of the ceremony. Since Alejandra is the most senior member of the group, she initiates the entrance into the church by dropping to her knees, then to her belly, and wriggling down the aisle toward the altar. Her journey requires two full minutes, as she rolls from right hip to left, elbows and forearms on the cool tiles. She is the first to receive the holy sacrament from the priest, light a candle, and be seated. Following Alejandra is a mother-daughter team wearing nearly identical masks depicting a cartoon-like bird. As they turn to view the priest, the mother pauses ever so slightly before fleeing, teaching her daughter the appropriate reaction. They enter a second time, executing the integral step slightly behind the beat but in perfect unison with one another. After the second flight, they enter on their knees, still in cadence; this time joined by husband and brother, or father and son, who are not in costume, but who complete the picture of a family attending mass together.

Occasionally there is an overlap of the completion of one devil's ritual and the entrance of another. As I focus on the tableau formed by the altar, the priest, and the exorcized devil, I hear the cry of and see the flurry of the next participant--a particularly feisty *diablo* dressed in red and green checks dividing her torso into quarters who dances near the doorway. With her third entrance she falls to her knees in an attempt to cover the obvious pain she feels with writhing and grimacing. Shoulders are hunched with tension, but she continues the syncopated rhythm with the clanging of the bell, still dancing. As she approaches the altar, she descends to all fours. This is equally painful, and my knees ache in kinesthetic sympathy. The svelte *diabla* finally drops to her left hip and drags her body weight the remaining distance.

About half way through the repeated drama, the priest, a Nigerian man who is unfamiliar with this Afro-Panamanian tradition, begins to play along with the sequence, raising his cross and waving the devil away. His levity elicits peals of laughter from the children, and they are once again completely engaged, waiting to see what this respected authority figure will do next. The priest tells me after the mass that the Church does not like to encourage acts of penitence which include physical abuse as is experienced by the *diablos de espejo* who push themselves to dance to a point of exhaustion and dehydration; however, there is a definite interest in accommodating the village people by incorporating folk traditions into Catholic methods of worship, especially, I presume, those traditions that concur, or at least do not defy, Christian teachings. In her essay, "The European Roots of Latin American Pilgrimage," Mary Lee Nolan comments on the European contribution to syncretic traditions in Latin America and states "...it seems likely that indigenous American elements of pilgrimage with the highest survival potential were those sufficiently familiar to European missionaries as to be encouraged or tolerated (Crumrine, 20)." By substituting "African traditions" for "indigenous American elements of pilgrimage," one must infer that the self-flagellation aspect of the *diablos de espejo* ritual either comes from African practices that were understood and/or tolerated by the Spanish or a direct influence from Christian doctrine which found its way to Central America in the 16th century. There is also the more likely possibility that the tradition is a blending of influences due to the "temporal distance" which separates the arrival of Africans during the days of the Spanish colonizers from today's Afro-Panamanian practices (8).

It is nearly dark as the remainder of participants make their entrances. The last costumed male to enter is the director of a performing group from Cativá. "Polanco" has a formal background in dance technique including ballet. Although his body type does not match the Western aesthetic of the classical ballet dancer, his *port de bras* is exquisite. Shoulders down, palms up, arms supported beautifully by the back, face lifted, he maintains his upper body tranquility while thighs thrust forward, weight supported over knees and the tops of his feet.

The entire folk procession has taken about an hour. After the last benedictions are bestowed on several uncostumed participants who bring up the rear, the priest conducts a Catholic mass in which the villagers participate. In July 2000, Director Rodriguez stopped the priest and explained that the people would respond better to an "Afro-mass," whereby drummers were invited to take up their instruments and accompany the singing. Fewer people had come out for the event that year, perhaps because of the rain,

and it was apparent that community interest needed stimulation in order for the tradition to survive. After attending an Afro-mass in Portobelo and a Catholic service in Havanah, Cuba which employed conga drums, I reflected not only on the melding of cultures and continents, but also on the necessity of incorporating relevant elements such as meaningful music and movement into ever-changing traditions for their very survival.

To conclude, the dance tradition of the *diablos de espejo* of Panama contains African influences, which are seen in the employment of a low center of gravity, earth-directed movements, full use of the upper and lower body, flexion of the spine and hips, and formations which emphasize community. Strong, repeated rhythmic patterns played on *tambores* and the positioning of the musicians among the dancers communicate to the viewer that these performers are commemorating their African heritage, while the combination of devil dancing with a Catholic mass, along with other elements such as the morning cleansing and self-negation, reflects the Panamanian connection with Spanish colonialism. I have witnessed other festivals involving absolution such as the drama of the *grandiablos* and the baptism of the devils of the congo ritual, but in neither situation is an actual Catholic priest involved. This collaboration between the protectors of the folk tradition and the contemporary Catholic Church support that the tradition of the devils of the mirrors reflects practices that have migrated from two continents, Africa and Europe, to find new meaning in the Isthmus of Panama.

NOTES

1. Escobal was founded as recently as 1914 when the United States flooded a number of villages that had existed in what is now Lake Gatun. This was one of the last stages in creating the Panama Canal.
2. The congo ritual of Panama is a series of events and festivities commemorating the dry season. It incorporates music, dance, and drama also referred to as *juegos* or games. For more information on the congos of Panama, see Smith and Drolet.
3. Santeño is a descriptive referring to that which pertains to the province of Los Santos.
4. The day of the week is Thursday, thus school is in session. Corpus Christi is a moveable holiday acknowledged exactly 40 days after Good Friday. Therefore, it always falls on a Thursday; however, some towns will hold festivities on the nearest weekend to allow for greater attendance and participation.
5. In July of 1999, the tropical sun was relentless. A year later, the day was overcast with intermittent rain, making the physical activity less dangerous, but also affecting the number of people who left their homes to watch the festivities.
6. There are examples of similar choreography including that of the folk dance Tontoso, performed by the *Ballet Sombrero e Sao* from Santa Cruz, Bolivia whereby a female representing the Angel of Ascension emerges from the church, is elevated, and then returns to the church.
7. Chorrera is a town approximately 25 kilometers from Panama City with a strong tradition of *grandiablos* or grand devils. The pageantry and dance of the *grandiablos* includes an enactment of the fight between the Archangel Michael and Lucifer.
8. In his article "The *Negros Congos* of Panama. Afro-Hispanic Creole Language and Culture," John Lipski comments on the "temporal distance" which separates today's congos from the African-descended slaves brought to Panama by the Spanish colonizers and states ". . . it is most likely that the congo dramatic games are not direct transmissions of singular events but rather the folkloric reconstruction of the ambience that characterized an earlier epoch (413)."

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Elizabeth ("Libby") Rhodes is the recipient of two Fulbright grants which have taken her to Panama and Bolivia. She holds an MFA in Dance from Mills College, a BA in Theatre Arts from Sonoma State University, and serves as an Associate Professor in the dance program at Stephen F. Austin State University. She thanks the Office of Research and Sponsored Programs at Stephen F. Austin State University for the 1999 Faculty Research Award which facilitated this work.

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